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C O N F I D E N T I A L NOUAKCHOTT 000138

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/17/2021
TAGS: [PREL](#) [USAU](#) [PGOV](#) [MR](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: MAURITANIAN RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL

REF: A. STATE 14163
[1](#)B. NOUAKCHOTT 6
[1](#)C. NOUAKCHOTT 47
[1](#)D. NOUAKCHOTT 101
[1](#)E. NOUAKCHOTT 118

Classified By: CDA Cornelius Walsh, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C/NF) Summary: Having watched the evolution of the Israeli relations issue in the context of the Mauritanian political crisis, we believe that the junta, particularly Foreign Minister Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, is deeply concerned about the repercussions of a formal break in the Mauritanian-Israeli relationship. Their steps to date, while detrimental to Israeli interests, have been incremental and hesitant. However, given the volatile nature of the issue, American engagement at this very sensitive time may be used by more radical members of the junta and its constituents, who have a planning horizon much more limited than that of the Foreign Minister, as a pretext to sever the relationship and free Mauritania from what they consider its onerous restraints. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Since the advent of the coup d'etat in early August, Embassy Nouakchott has observed and reported on the junta's approach towards relations with Israel as well as the attitudes and statements of other participants in the current political crisis affecting Mauritania. Inasmuch as Israeli Ambassador Arbel had not presented his credentials prior to the coup and that Israel hewed to the western policy of non-recognition, this kept the issue off the table for some months. Always a delicate subject, it appeared that both the junta and its opponents preferred that the issue not enter their political world.

[1](#)3. (U) The late December Israeli incursion into Gaza, however, changed the nature of the discussion. The junta found itself pressured by its domestic constituency, its opponents, and fellow Muslim states to cut relations with Israel as a show of solidarity with Gaza and the Muslim mainstream. Indeed, it appears that some states offered recognition and financial support for just such a gesture. Large and sometimes violent anti-Israeli demonstrations focused on the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott further forced the junta to address the issue. On the domestic front the junta appeared to be in a competition with its opponents as to which could be more anti-Israel than the other.

[1](#)4. (C/NF) Despite these pressures, the junta has proceeded slowly and very carefully in its measures against the Israeli presence. It has recalled its Ambassador (Ref B), declared a freeze in relations (Ref C), almost surreptitiously closed its Embassy in Tel Aviv and removed its personnel (Ref D), and finally two weeks ago informally called the Israeli Ambassador and asked that he take "appropriate measures" regarding the freeze (Ref E). As of February 16, the Israeli Ambassador has not been contacted again by the junta's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

[1](#)5. (C/NF) We have sometimes considered the junta's steps to be an attempt to have its cake and eat it as well, i.e., give the appearance of distancing itself from Israel while

maintaining a straightened relationship. However, its hesitancy, its apparent rejection of blandishments from Iran, Libya and other players, and its rhetorical back and forth with the opposition lead us to believe that the junta is well aware of the serious consequences of an actual break in diplomatic relations. The formal break is indeed a card that the junta may wish to play at some point. However, indications until now have been that it will not do so without a pretext or an action that will allow it to gain an advantage either from international partners (it already has anti-sanction support from the Arab League) or against its domestic opponents.

¶6. (C/NF) Intervention at this point may be the pretext the junta desires/needs to make its final break. Using a USG reminder as the focus of its rupture would burnish the junta's "eastern" credentials with a number of Muslim states. Having identified the United States as the most adamant of its international critics, the junta would also be tempted to use such an intervention to undermine our democratic credentials with the Abdallahi administration, the FNDD, and other parties with whom we have worked throughout the past six months. There are those, evidenced, in a recent article in a minor local newspaper "Points Chauds" who choose to see the sanctions question and the internationalization of the Mauritanian crisis as (in the words of the paper's headline) "the Jewish lobby against the Arab pressure group, who will have the last word?" We would therefore recommend that the request outlined in Ref A be reconsidered.

¶7. (C/NF) Comment: In our conversations with the Israeli Ambassador we sense that the GOI does not realize that the full spectrum of political opinion in Mauritania, junta, anti-junta, and opportunistic, is opposed to continuing relations with Israel. The sole factor that has kept the junta from a full breach is its understanding that such a move would make its relations with the United States and the west that much more difficult. This is understood as well by the opposition parties which, while goading the junta to take action, do not make such a break a sine qua non in their own position papers. In our view, the Israelis could garner possible good will in the future were they to follow the Mauritanian lead and depart quietly and unofficially to return just as quietly when conditions here and in the Middle East improve. There is, of course, the danger that this would be another pretext for a formal break but there is also the possibility that the junta and/or any follow-on administration would consider such discretion as a positive factor in the future. End Comment.

HANKINS